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The Question(s) of Religion in the Irish Census

Submission to the Central Statistics Office's Census 2021
Consultation on behalf of the *Iona Institute*

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Introduction

The methodology with which the Census asked about religion in 2016 – q. 12 ‘What is your religion?/Cén creideamh atá agat?’ – was, as in previous years, a source of controversy. This was widely expressed in the media, both in the run-up to Census Day, and then again once the figures were released. According to the CSO's own published guidance,

This question is not about frequency of attendance at church or other place of worship. People should answer the question based on how they feel now about their religious beliefs, if any. The question is asking about the person's current religion or beliefs and not about the religion the person may have been brought up with. (CSO 2016)

According to the question's critics, by focusing exclusively on how someone ‘feel[s] now’ about their religion, it tells us nothing about whether a person actually *practises*, or even really *believes* in, their chosen affiliation. Prominent commentators, from a range of perspectives, concur in claiming this gives a misleadingly false impression of Ireland's ‘true’ religiosity – or rather, lack of it. For instance, it is pointed out that many of the 79% ticking ‘Roman Catholic’ do not attend Mass regularly, and likely do not believe the core tenets of Catholicism (Clarke 2016; Ingle 2016; Journal 2016; O’Leary 2016). This point can work both ways, however: many of the 10% ticking ‘No religion’

are not – as they are often assumed to be in the media and popular imagination – thoroughgoing atheists or secular humanists either (Quinn 2016, 2017).

Against this background, the possibility has been raised that the CSO may revisit the way in which it asks about religion on the Census (McGee 2017). Rightly so. There is clear public utility in gathering accurate information on the religious character of the Irish people. While this is arguably true for all countries, it is all the more so in the Irish context, given the significant role that religion has both historically played and, in comparison with almost every other western European nation (see Bullivant 2017), strikingly *still does*. Statistics on the relative strength of different (non) religious groups are used by numerous stakeholders in various ways, and to various ends. These range from informing planning policy in local education (i.e., what types of schools are needed, and where), to rhetorical appeals as part of moral, legal, and political debates. Critically here, the *changing* nature of Irish religiosity is the subject of a great deal of public, media, and academic attention. Furthermore, although attention typically focuses on the relative proportions affirming ‘Catholic’, ‘Church of Ireland’, and ‘No religion’ it is worth noting the importance of possessing accurate figures for minority religious groups (who, given their size, are often overlooked in sample surveys).¹

Asking good questions about religion: an analysis

Religious identity/affiliation is a complicated thing: it brings together aspects – positive or negative, weak or strong – of upbringing, belief, past and current practice, feelings of belonging, and one’s sense of place vis-a-vis familial, cultural, ethnic, social, and national traditions. Different people, naturally, weight each aspect differently. For some, simply having been raised as an X, regardless of present practice or conviction, is enough to make them ‘always an X’; for others, only those who believe every tenet, and fulfil every obligation, count as ‘real’ adherents. Many, perhaps most, people find

¹ Indeed, a major motivation for introducing a religion question to the UK Census in 2001 (since repeated in 2011) was precisely a desire from smaller religious groups – Muslims especially – for their size to be accurately counted, and thus recognized, by the state (see Field 2014).

themselves somewhere between these two extremes. Regardless of where this line is drawn, a significant proportion of people *know* what they ‘are’, religiously speaking, and can be relied upon to answer ‘X’ or ‘Y’ when asked. For such people, the precise wording of a question, or the context in which it is posed, is unlikely materially to affect the answer they give.

For others, however, questions with different nuances of wording, or even the same question asked at different times, may elicit differing responses. This ought not to surprise us. It is easy to imagine why the same person may feel a ‘Catholic’ in some ways (e.g., sacramentally, culturally, in some beliefs, and to some degree of practice), and as someone of ‘No religion’ in other ways (e.g., in terms of current lifestyle, certain other beliefs or doubts, and in lack of regular practice). And especially if it is not a question they are asked very often, seemingly slight differences in the wording of the question – or a host of other, contextual factors – might provoke either response (see Sullivan et al. 2012; Day and Lee 2014; Hackett 2014). This phenomenon, which is perhaps very widespread in western countries, has only recently begun to attract serious sociological attention (Lim et al. 2010; Hout 2017).

With regard to the Census, these observations have three significant ramifications. The **first** is that there is no single, ‘silver bullet’ question on religious identity and affiliation that would, in and of itself, perfectly capture the ‘true’ state of religion in Ireland. It is true that ‘What is your religion?’ typically garners a higher positive response than do other common ways of asking. The European Social Survey (ESS), for example, asks respondents ‘Do you consider yourself belonging to any particular religion or denomination?’ (with a follow-up question for those answering ‘yes’). In 2014, this indicated that 26% of the adult Irish population regard themselves as having no religion: a much higher proportion than the 2016 Census’ 10%.² But critically, it by no means follows that one question is objectively *better* than others. True, many of those who identified as Catholics in Census 2016 might well, with a

² A similar phenomenon occurs with the UK Census, which also asks ‘What is your religion?’. This too typically receives a lower ‘No religion’ response than do major social surveys, which ask about religious identity/affiliation in different ways (see Voas and Bruce 2004; Day 2011; Field 2014).

differently worded question, have identified as having no religion. But, as noted above, this is a double-edged sword. For equally, many who said they didn't 'consider [themselves] belonging to any particular religion or denomination' on the ESS would likely have answered a more straightforward 'What is your religion?' question with 'Catholic'. Frustrating as this may be for those eager to identify the *real* proportion of *real* Catholics or the *real* nonreligious (or *real* whatevers) in Ireland, it is simply an outcome of 'the complex and messy relationships [...] which make up the "fuzzy frontiers" of religious identity' (Gregg and Scholefield 2015: 10).

The **second** ramification follows necessarily from the first. Having, over several decades, consistently asked about religious identity on the Census in a certain manner, it would be catastrophic for the wording of the question now to be changed in any substantial way. To replace the current question with a different, supposedly (though chimerically) 'more accurate' single question, would mean that no remotely meaningful comparisons could be drawn between 2021's data and that of previous Censuses. This would be especially unfortunate since it is largely the *changing* nature and significance of religion in Ireland that makes successive Census's religion data so significant in the first place (hence the slew of articles, in Ireland and far beyond – far too many to cite here – reporting on the rise in 'No religion' from 2011 and 2016). Since changes in question wording, even (to non-experts) seemingly minor ones, can have a notable effect on the responses one receives, it would thence be impossible to know to what extent any differences between 2016 and 2021 were actual ones, or simply functions of the change in methodology. Furthermore, no matter how strongly and clearly this point was made in any official guidance or reporting of the results, it is inevitable that comparisons *will* be made between the 2016 and 2021 rates. Changing the current religion question in any substantive way has, therefore, a very serious potential to mislead the public.

The **third** and final ramification also follows, more-or-less directly, from the above analysis. Given the richly complex nature of religiosity,³ and the impossibility of

³ Which is *not* to say that it is not a real thing, nor one about which it is important and useful to gather statistics.

capturing it accurately with any single question, it follows that the Census could capture a fuller picture of it by asking additional, well-formulated questions. There are two that I would strongly recommend here. The most obvious one concerns *religious practice*. This is because the frequency with which someone actually takes the time and effort to perform certain religion-specific actions – most obviously, through attending religious services – is arguably the strongest single indicator of religious commitment (see Voas and Crockett 2005: 14; Bullivant 2016: 189). As others have pointed out (e.g., Ingle 2016; O’Leary 2016), this would mirror the approach already taken by the Census with regard to speaking Irish. The inclusion of a religious practice measure would, moreover, address many of the abovementioned criticisms of the current religion question: it would, for example, permit those who wished to separate ‘practising Catholics’ from ‘cultural’ ones. Such data would also be hugely valuable for Ireland’s religious groups themselves (e.g., for planning church buildings/closures etc.), as well for other purposes (e.g., schools provision). Religious practice is not, of course, simply a ‘yes or no’ affair. Ideally, a form of question such as the following could be used:⁴

Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services?

- More than once a week
- Once a week
- At least once a month
- Only on special holy days
- Never or practically never

In addition to a new question on religious practice, a question on *religious upbringing* would also be highly desirable. By asking respondents *both* how they currently identify (i.e., with the existing ‘What is your religion?’ question) *and* the religion or denomination, if any, they were brought up in, it becomes possible to chart, in vastly more detail, the changing religious landscape of Ireland. Most obviously, it

⁴ I have adapted this from the question and responses given in the European Social Survey.

allows one to see the proportion of ‘cradle Xs’ who now identify as ‘current Ys’ (and vice versa). This is potentially important for several reasons: it enables one to see whether shifting patterns in religious affiliation are due to conversions (or ‘deconversions’), immigration, and/or differential birth rates. It would also allow respondents to formally acknowledge their personal history within a certain religion or denomination, even if they no longer affiliate in that way. The fact that, in Census 2016, 8096 people took the trouble to write in ‘Lapsed Catholic’, and a further 74 ‘Lapsed Church of Ireland’, as their religious affiliations, suggests that this is important to people. If this proposal were to be further explored, I would suggest a form of words along the lines ‘In what religion or denomination, if any, were you brought up?’,⁵ followed by the same list of options, in the same order (including the box for write-in options), which accompany the ‘What is your religion?’ question.

Summary of recommendations

The below summarizes the three main recommendations made in the above paragraphs. While I strongly urge that all be seriously considered by the CSO – and would be happy to elaborate on any/all of them, if desired – they are nevertheless presented here in descending order of importance.

- 1) That the question on religious identity/affiliation from Census 2016 (and earlier) be retained, unchanged.**
- 2) That a question, probing frequency of religious practice, be added.**
- 3) That a question, probing religion or denomination of upbringing, be added.**

⁵ This is a slight modification of the question currently asked in the British Social Attitudes survey.

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